

Objective Justification

by Edward W.A. Koehler¹

The doctrine of justification is rightly regarded to be the central doctrine of the Scriptures. All other teachings of the Bible either point to it, or they radiate from it. We can understand neither the work of Christ's redemption nor the work of the Spirit's sanctification if we do not understand the doctrine of justification. Luther calls it "this only solid rock,"² and says: "In my heart reigns only this article, namely, faith in Christ, from which, through which, and to which all my theological thought flows forth and back" (Luther's Forward to the Epistle to the Galatians, St. Louis edition, vol. 9, col. 9).³ Let no one, then, count it time lost which he spends in the study of this fundamental doctrine of our faith.

By his own works no man is justified before God.— According to the teachings of the Bible "there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not," Eccl. 7:20; "they are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one," Ps. 14:3. Therefore "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," Rom. 1:18, and all the world is guilty before God, Rom. 3:19. By sin, man departed from God, the source of all his joy and happiness, and brought upon himself misery and unspeakable woe.

The reason of natural man now argues that, as by his own fault he became guilty before God, he must and can by his own efforts also become righteous before Him; all that is necessary for him to do is to keep the Law, for it is written, "The doers of the Law shall be justified," Rom. 2:13. Indeed, the Law is holy, just, and good, Rom. 7:12, and he that keeps its commandments shall surely live by them, Rom. 10:5. The Law shows a perfect way to righteousness and life. Still Paul tells us, "By the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified," Rom. 3:20. The fault, however, lies not with the Law, but with us. For the Law is made weak through our flesh, Rom. 8:3. Our carnal mind is opposed to the Law, and therefore we cannot please God, Rom. 8:7, 8; even our righteousnesses in the eyes of the Holy One are as filthy rags, Is. 64:6. Only if we could rid ourselves of the guilt inherited from Adam, Rom. 5:19, could eradicate from our nature the original depravity, Rom. 7:18, could keep the whole Law, and not offend in one point, James 2:10, only then could we be declared just according to the Law. But as no man on earth is able to render such perfect obedience, the words of Paul remain true, "By the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified."

Yet God is not willing that any should perish, 2 Pet. 3:9. Therefore He provided a way by which all sinners can escape from the wrath to come and inherit eternal life.

God reconciled the world unto Himself.— We read 2 Cor. 5:19, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." God did not reconcile Himself to the world by simply overlooking the sins of men and receiving them back into communion with Himself without full atonement being made. However, it was not man that made an atonement for his own sins, but God did it for man. God reconciled the world unto Himself by setting the world right with Himself, in exacting full satisfaction for the shortcomings of man. This He did in Christ, 2 Cor. 5:18; Rom. 5:10, who by His active and passive obedience made full amends for the trespasses of all men, 1 John 2:2, and thus satisfied all demands of God's holiness and justice against sinful mankind. While the wrath of God against sin itself continues as before, Ps. 5:4, there was by this reconciliation effected a change in the mind and attitude of God towards sinners. His righteous wrath was appeased by the blood of His Son, 1 John 2:2 (ἰλασμός, from ἰλάσκομαι, which means to appease the wrath, to conciliate). Because of the redemption by Christ there is now in God "good will toward men."

Nonimputation of sin the immediate effect of reconciliation.— Accepting the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world, God did not impute their trespasses unto them, 2 Cor. 5:19. The reconciliation by Christ did not merely dispose God, or make Him willing, not to impute sins at some future time and under certain conditions; the nonimputation of sins is in our text not presented as merely purposed and intended, but

¹ This article originally appeared in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 16 (April, 1945) 4:217-235.

² „Dieser einigen und festen Felsen“ [The editor will provide the translation of all German words and phrases in the main text and place the original words and phrases in these footnotes.]

³ „In meinem Herzen herrscht allein dieser Artikel, naemlich der Glaube an Christum, aus welchem, durch welchen und zu welchem alle meine theologischen Gedanken fließen und zurueckfließen.“ (Luthers Vorrede zum Galaterbrief, St. Louis, IX:9.)

as a fact which took place right then and there; it was the immediate effect of the reconciliation. It is definitely contrary to the words of our text to make them say that by the reconciliation the nonimputation of sins was made possible and that man must repent and believe before this possibility becomes an actuality. This nonimputation of sins was not merely planned for the future, but it is a finished act of God, which does not repeat itself every time a sinner comes to faith. For in the main clause, "God *was* in Christ," the verb is in the past tense; hence the following participles, "reconciling the world," and "not imputing their trespasses unto them," must also be understood as having happened in the past. Therefore we are justified in saying that when God accepted the redemptive work of His Son, He did not impute to men on earth their trespasses. The nonimputation is an accomplished fact. Furthermore, this nonimputation did not pertain to certain individuals only, *e.g.*, only to those who would believe; for the pronoun "them" refers to the world, to all people in the world. This nonimputation therefore is universal in its scope; it includes Jews and Gentiles, Christians and infidels, Peter and Judas, you and me.

In our thinking we indeed differentiate between redemption, reconciliation, and justification, as Paul does in 2 Cor. 5:19. But we may not separate them nor change the order in which they are named, for they are as closely related to each other as cause and effect. By the work of redemption Christ achieved our reconciliation unto God, and the immediate effect of this reconciliation was the nonimputation of our sins, or our justification. Thus without the redemption by Christ there could be no reconciliation and no justification, and justification presupposes the reconciliation and the atonement by Christ. We may not think of one and forget the other two, for they are connected as three links in a chain. When Paul tells us that we are justified by the blood of Christ, Rom. 5:9, he includes the reconciliation; and when he tells us that we are reconciled by His death, Rom. 5:10, this includes our justification. Because Christ lived and died for us, that is why we are reconciled to God, and because we are reconciled to God, that is why He does not impute our trespasses to us.

Not to impute sins means to forgive sins, to justify.— According to Webster "to impute" means "to charge, as a fault; theologically, to ascribe vicariously." As men had sinned, their trespasses should have been charged against them; but vicariously God imputed them to Christ, whom He made to be sin for us, 2 Cor. 5:21. *Not* to impute trespasses, then, can only mean that the sins are not charged against a person. But an offense that is not reckoned, charged, and held against one is forgiven. Not to impute sins therefore means to forgive sins, to acquit, to absolve. This fully agrees with the Scriptures, for in Rom. 4:7, 8 we read: "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." Here Paul uses the terms "to forgive iniquities" and "not to impute sin" as synonymous, both terms describing the identical act.

When, therefore, Paul in 2 Cor. 5:19 tells us that God did not impute their trespasses unto the men in the world, this can only mean that God forgave the sins of all men and absolved them from all their transgressions. It has been argued that we may possibly say that God forgave all sins, but that we may not say that He forgave all sins *to* all men, may not say, "that God has forgiven the sinners in general the sins,"⁴ because that would imply that forgiveness is also imparted to, and bestowed on, all sinners. We answer, in the first place, that is not the necessary connotation of this term; in the second place, Paul uses a similar term, saying, "not imputing their trespasses *unto* them." The question of the offer, the acceptance, and the bestowal of forgiveness does not enter in at this stage of the discussion. Of these we shall speak later. Here we wish to point out that "not to impute sin" means "to forgive sin"; and since the nonimputation of sin took place when God reconciled the world unto Himself, the forgiving of sins also took place at that time.

But Paul uses another term as synonymous with "forgiving iniquities" and "not imputing sin," namely, "to impute righteousness without works." We see this from 2 Cor. 5:21, where we are told that our sins were charged to Christ for the purpose that in Him we might be made righteous. Thus we have this blessed exchange that our sins were laid on Jesus and His righteousness is credited to us. But if God imputed to men "righteousness without works," then He certainly regarded, accounted, and declared them righteous and just; in other words, He justified them.

⁴ „dass Gott den Suendern insgesamt die Sünden vergeben hat“

This also appears from Rom. 5:9: “being now justified by His blood.” Here the same word and form is used as in v. 1, “being justified by faith.” Yet both verses do not speak of the same matter. In v. 1 we are told how we *obtained* this righteousness and entered into personal possession of what Christ achieved for us. But in v. 9 we learn how Christ *achieved* righteousness and justification. Christ died for the ungodly, v. 6, He shed His blood for many for the remission of sins, Matt. 26:28, and ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ⁵ we are justified; that means, because by His blood and death He made full atonement for all our sins, God has in view thereof declared and pronounced all of us just and righteous. To be sure, in our thinking we can differentiate between the suffering and death of Christ and the resultant reconciliation and the nonimputation of sins, or the justification of the sinner. But these are so closely and intimately connected that we may not separate them. And as the blood of Christ is the *causa efficiens*⁶ of it all, Paul can very properly say that we were justified by His blood. Now, all this did not happen during our lifetime. It does not happen only then when a man comes to faith; but “while we were yet sinners,” “when we were enemies,” vv. 8, 10, Christ died for us and justified us by His blood. This justification by the blood of Christ therefore took place before we came to faith, before we were born. Moreover, as Christ died for all men, 2 Cor. 5:15, the power and efficacy of His blood and death resulted in the justification of all men. “Christ died for all godless people; [He] has justified them all through His death” (Stoekhardt, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 227).⁷ Accepting the precious blood and innocent suffering and death of His beloved Son as payment in full for the sins of men, God adjudged and accounted all men just and righteous in His sight. It is true that by faith man must apply and appropriate to himself this forgiveness and this justifying sentence of God; yet this is impossible if forgiveness and justification are not accomplished facts before he can by faith apply them to himself.

It must therefore be admitted that “not to impute sins,” “to forgive sins,” “to impute righteousness,” “to justify,” are synonymous terms. They all describe the same act of God, though they view it from different angles. If sins are not imputed, they are forgiven; and if they are forgiven, then man is accounted just and righteous. And all this happened in the court of heaven when God accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world.

Justification a judicial act of God.— Justification is not a moral transformation, a renewal of life, meaning that a wicked man by a change of conduct becomes a good and just man; justification is not sanctification. The Greek word δικαιοῦν is a juridical term and means “to make just, to pronounce and treat as righteous, to justify,” (Liddell & Scott). Such judicial action may be based on the works a man has done, as in Rom. 2:13: “The doers of the Law shall be justified.” This means that if a man has complied with the demands of the Law, he will be regarded and declared just. But it may also be based on what someone else has done for us and in our place, and whose merit is imputed and credited to us, as in Rom. 3:24: “Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” and in Rom. 5:9: “Being now justified by His blood.” Here man is made and declared just not because of what he has done, but because of the vicarious atonement of Christ. What Christ, his Substitute, has done for him is reckoned to him for righteousness, and thus he is made and becomes righteous by imputation. In view of what Christ, whom God had made to be sin for us, 2 Cor. 5:21, had done and suffered for all mankind God no longer imputed their sins to them, but forgave them and imputed to them the merits of their Substitute; He adjudged all men righteous, He justified them. This justification therefore is an act of God that takes place outside of man. It produces no change in the individual, does not make him personally more righteous in his life; it simply alters his status before God. Man is not declared just after he himself has become just in his life; but while he was yet a sinner, Rom. 5:8, while he was yet ungodly, Rom. 4:5, God justified him by grace for Christ’s sake. Justification is a judgment, a sentence, of God regarding man, a sentence which is not in the least based on any merit or worthiness in man, but solely on the grace of God in Christ; a sentence which, while it pertains to man, lies, up to this point, outside of his knowledge and experience, for it was passed in the privacy of God’s council. And only when God reveals this gracious judgment to us, as He does in the Gospel, may we know of it and trust in it for our salvation.

⁵ “by His blood”

⁶ “efficient cause”

⁷ „Christus is fuer alle gottlosen Menschen gestorben, hat sie alle durch seinen Tod gerechtfertigt.“ (Stoekhardt, *Roemerbrief*, p. 227.)

Universal, or objective justification.— This justifying judgment of God described above covers all men. Again we call attention to 2 Cor. 5:19, where we are told that in Christ God reconciled the *world* to Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, which means that for Christ's sake He adjudged all men righteous. From Rom 5:8, 9 we learned that Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners and that by His blood we are justified. As Christ died not only for the believers but for all the "ungodly," v. 6; 2 Cor. 5:15, all the ungodly were by His blood justified before God. As little as we may limit the redemption of Christ to certain individuals, so little may we limit the immediate effect of this redemption, namely, justification, to these individuals; by the blood of Christ all men were justified.

In Rom. 4:25 we read: "Who [Christ] was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification." In the preceding verses, 9-24, Paul speaks of those whose faith is reckoned for righteousness; but what he says there is based on what he says in v. 25. For if Christ had not been raised for their justification, their faith could not be reckoned unto them for righteousness, they would still be in their sins, and their faith would be vain, 1 Cor. 15:17. We may not limit v. 25 to believers only, and the word "our" in our text does not refer to those people only to whom these words were addressed, including Paul himself. For we know from the Bible that Christ bore the sins of the whole world, John 1:29, and that He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, 1 John 2:2. If, then, He was delivered for the offenses of all men, then His resurrection also must mean something to all men. And what does it mean? "Our justification." The resurrection of Christ is positive evidence that by His blood and death He reconciled all those to God for whose offenses He was delivered, Rom. 5:10, and justified all those for whom He died, Rom. 5:8, 9. This text therefore proves the universal justification of all mankind. It is true, if the individual is to have and enjoy the blessings and benefits of this justification, he must in faith trust in, and accept for himself, what Christ has achieved for him. Yet it is apparent that before he can *believe* that he is justified before God, he *has been justified*.

Let us also look at Rom. 5:12-19. Running through this entire section there are two principal thoughts that are contrasted to each other. The one is that by the disobedience of one, of Adam, all men were by imputation made sinners, v. 19a, and that because of Adam's sin the condemnation of death came upon all men, v. 18a. The other thought, parallel to the first, is that "the grace of God hath abounded unto many," v. 15. Let us note the tense of the verb: not "shall abound" or "may possibly abound," but "hath abounded." Now, in what way? By Christ's obedience many were by imputation constituted, set down as righteous, v. 19b, and because of His righteousness, justification of life came upon all men, v. 18b. The word "many" in this section refers to all, as may be clearly seen from vv. 12 and 15, and vv. 18 and 19, where both words are used interchangeably. Neither should the future tense in v. 19b disturb us; for this is not a temporal future, meaning that at some future time many shall be made righteous, but it is a logical (gnomic) future, meaning that if it is true that by the disobedience of one many were made sinners, then it will follow that by the obedience of Christ many shall be made righteous. And this "much more" so since the grace of God "hath abounded unto many," v. 15. If the offense of one had such far-reaching effect as to bring the judgment of death upon all men, much more will the righteousness of Christ result in the justification of life unto all men. It is absolutely arbitrary and without foundation in text and context if we restrict "all men" and "many" to the believers and read v. 18 "By the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men 'that believe' unto justification of life," and v. 19: "By the obedience of one shall many 'that believe' be made righteous." This would simply destroy Paul's entire argument in this section; for the parallel thought, namely, that by Adam's sin all men were constituted sinners and were subject to the judgment of death, would have no meaning, no counterpart, if by the obedience and righteousness of Christ not all men were constituted righteous and justified. We know full well that man is justified by faith, Rom. 3:28, and we shall discuss that later, but that does not give us the right to restrict the words "upon all men unto justification of life" in v. 18 to the believers alone. Nor may we weaken the statement in Rom. 5:18 to mean that "according to the intention" of God the righteousness of Christ was to result for all men unto justification of life, but that actually it does so only in case of the believers. For as it is a fact that the offense of Adam resulted in the condemnation of death for all men, even so it is a fact that the righteousness of Christ resulted in the justification of life to all men. What Paul, therefore, teaches in this section is briefly this, that, as the sin of Adam brought upon all men the condemnation of death, so, and much more so, did the righteousness of Christ bring upon all men the justification of life.

These texts prove conclusively that the real and original gracious judgment of God by which sinners are absolved and accounted righteous is not limited to the believers, but covers all men. For this reason it is called *universal* justification. But it is also called *objective* justification. For though thereby all men are freely justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, still not one sinner is, so far, personally benefited thereby in the sense that he has and enjoys what this justification implies. In fact, up to this point no one knows of it; much less can he trust in it. It all happened in the court of God in heaven. "By Himself, in His own forum, God has absolved and declared righteous the whole world of sinners by grace for Christ's sake."⁸ Because this act of God is here considered by itself, irrespective of how man would react to it, whether he would accept it and have and enjoy its blessings or whether he would reject it in unbelief, it is called objective justification. Even as we can present the doctrine of redemption objectively, stating exactly what Christ has done and won for all men, without pointing out that all this is ours by faith, so the Bible also presents objectively what God has done with all men because of this redemption in Christ, namely, that He no longer imputes their trespasses unto them, but has declared them all just and righteous. It is one thing what God for the sake of Christ has done with the whole world, and it is another thing what happens when the individual in faith apprehends this.

Objective justification the basis of subjective justification.— In his letters Paul stresses justification by faith, or, as it is commonly called, individual, or subjective, justification. And this is perfectly proper, for it is by faith, and by faith alone, that the individual applies to himself the gracious judgment of God, and thus gains personal possession and enjoyment of all it implies. Yet in the background of this justification by faith there is with Paul, and there must be with us, the doctrine of universal, or objective, justification.

The Gospel the official proclamation of God's pardon and absolution to a sin-cursed world.— In order that we may see more clearly in this matter, it may be helpful to distinguish between (a) the justifying act of God, (b) the proclamation of the gracious judgment of God in the Gospel, (c) the acceptance of this proclamation on the part of the individual through faith.

In the preceding paragraphs our chief purpose was to establish the fact that God justified all sinners freely by grace through the redemption in Christ. This act of God happens not when a man comes to faith nor after he has come to faith, but it happened the moment that God accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world; it happened in the court of God in heaven, without the knowledge and experience of man, and irrespective of the attitude of man toward it. This act of God is not repeated, even as the redemption by Christ, on which it is based, is not repeated. The justifying sentence of God, by which He did not impute the sins to the people in the world but declared them just, stands and remains in force, even as a law once passed remains in force until it is abrogated.

Another matter is the proclamation of this sentence and the offer of all it implies. If nothing more had happened than this, that God by grace for Christ's sake had justified all sinners, if He had kept this judgment in the secret of His heart, then no man on earth could have any knowledge of what God had done for and with this sin-cursed world, nor could any man in this life ever be benefited thereby. What, in that case, God would hereafter have done with those whom He justified we do not know. However, God did not forgive the sins of men and justify the ungodly just for His own pleasure and satisfaction, but sinners were to be saved thereby. A governor does not pardon a convict to please himself, but to benefit the prisoner, and to this end he makes the pardon known to him. So also God makes known to the world what in His secret counsel He has resolved; He publishes His gracious judgment of justification. He not only reconciled the world unto Himself, but He "hath committed unto us the Word of Reconciliation," 2 Cor. 5:19. In the Gospel He reveals what otherwise would forever remain hidden from us, 1 Cor. 2:7-10. Here He tells us that He is not merely inclined and ready to forgive our sins and that He will do so if and when we believe; but He tells us that, since Christ has atoned for the sins of all men, 1 John 2:2, He does not impute them to the world, but has forgiven them for Christ's sake, who was delivered for all men's offenses and raised again for their justification, Rom. 4:25. For this reason Paul tells us that in the Gospel "is the righteousness of God revealed," Rom. 1:17, that is, the righteousness which Christ achieved for us, 2 Cor. 5:21; for this reason Christ tells us "that repentance and remission of sins should

⁸ „Bei sich selbst, in seinem eigenen Forum, hat Gott aus Gnaden um Christi willen die gesamte Suenderwelt absolviert und fuer gerecht erklart.“

be preached among all nations,” Luke 24:47; for this reason Paul said in his sermon at Antioch “that through this man [Christ] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins,” Acts 13:38. As far as the sins of men are concerned, the Gospel does not tell us that God is ready and willing to forgive them if and when a man believes; it does not offer a potential forgiveness of sins; it does not tell us that the actual forgiving on the part of God takes place not before the believing takes place on the part of man; but the Gospel tells us that when God in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself, He then did not impute the trespasses unto men, He then forgave all their sins to all of them. The act of forgiving is not held in abeyance, but it is finished, it is accomplished, the sins *are* forgiven to all men. Therefore we do not preach of and about forgiveness of sins, but we *preach forgiveness itself*; we offer to men a finished product, not a future possibility.

It is quite incomprehensible how any man can say that the Gospel indeed proclaims and offers forgiveness of sins to all the world and yet deny that the sins of all men are already forgiven. No prison warden may tell the convict that he is free unless the governor has previously pardoned him. If this has not yet happened, the warden may perhaps talk of the willingness of the governor to pardon and about the possibility that he will do so, but he cannot “talk pardon,” cannot tell the prisoner, “You are pardoned, you are free.” Even so here. If the sins of men have not yet been actually and really forgiven, the forgiveness of sins is not yet ready to be offered as a free gift; then we cannot speak of forgiveness as of an accomplished fact, but only as of an eventuality contingent on something else besides the grace of God in Christ. This opinion finds support neither in the term “forgiveness of sins,” which means that the sins are forgiven, nor in the teaching of the Bible, which definitely tells us that God did not impute sins to men, when He reconciled the world unto Himself. “That God has forgiven sins to the sinners in general and declared the whole world righteous”⁹ is a fact that is not affected by the faith or the unbelief of man, Rom. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:12.¹⁰ As little as the acceptance or the rejection of the invitation had anything to do with the preparation of the great supper, Luke 14:16-24, so little has the belief or unbelief in the Gospel promise anything to do with the preparation of the things that are now ready for all.

If the real forgiving and justifying act of God does not take place until the moment a person comes to faith, then we shall have to change our entire mode of preaching. Then we cannot assure our people that their sins *are* forgiven, not even in absolution; all we could say is that God is very anxious to forgive their sins, but that they must first believe, and then He will surely do so. And if a person were in doubt as to whether he believes—and this is sometimes the case—we should have no way of comforting him, since the fact of his believing would first have to be established before the act of forgiving could take place. If this theory is correct, it will also affect the merits of Christ’s redemption; for then Christ did not actually justify us by His blood, Rom. 5:9, but only made our justification possible, pending our faith; then He achieved for us not an actual forgiveness but only a potential one, which becomes actual only if and when we believe. This theory will also change the object of our faith. For if God has not yet forgiven the sins of man, the penitent sinner can at first only believe that God *will* forgive; believing this, God does forgive; and thereafter the sinner believes that his sins *are* forgiven.

But thanks be to God, in His Gospel He does not merely hold out to us a possible, potential forgiveness of sins, which becomes a reality only in the event that a sinner believes, but here God proclaims an actual, factual, accomplished forgiveness. “All things are now ready.”¹¹ In the Gospel we learn, that God reconciled the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, 2 Cor. 5:19; that all that have sinned are freely justified by grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Rom. 3:23, 24; that the righteousness of Christ resulted for all men unto justification of life, Rom. 5:18. In the Gospel we have God’s own official and authoritative declaration of what transpired in the court of heaven when He accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world. “In the Gospel it is not only announced to people, that, if they believe, they can be justified and saved, but that righteousness already exists for them, that God already has passed down upon

⁹ „Dass Gott den Suendern insgemein die Sunden vergeben und die ganze Welt fuer gerecht erklart hat“

¹⁰ Rom. 3:3: “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?” 2 Tim. 2:12-13: “if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

¹¹ Luke 14:17

them a favorable judgment, that God in Christ already looks upon humanity with eyes of pleasure, that sinners have a gracious God” (Stoeckhardt, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 46).¹²

If, therefore, we tell any man that God for Christ’s sake has forgiven his sins, we are simply stating a fact that is revealed in the Bible by God Himself. This, however, does not mean that he also *has* forgiveness of sins. Full well we know that no man will and can accept this forgiveness in true faith if he does not repent of his sins. Yet his unbelief does not invalidate the fact that his sins are forgiven, Rom. 3:3. Whoever hedges in this gracious declaration, free promise, and outright offer of an accomplished forgiveness of sins with all manner of conditions that must be fulfilled before this forgiveness becomes an actuality, simply does not understand the quintessence of the Gospel. Even faith, of which we shall speak below, is not a condition in the sense that the forgiving act of God or the promise and offer of forgiveness is contingent upon it. God neither forgives sins, nor does He offer forgiveness of sins, in view of faith, for both forgiveness itself and the offer of forgiveness in the Gospel are there before man believes. Faith is only the means, *medium apprehendens*,¹³ by which we accept what is offered as a ready gift.

Personal justification by faith.— In sketching the doctrine of Paul in an earlier paragraph we have shown that on the basis of objective or universal justification he teaches a subjective or personal justification by faith. We have also called attention to the fact that for the sake of clarity we must distinguish between the original act of God, by which He forgave all sins to all men and thus justified them, between the publication of this fact in the Gospel, and, finally, the acceptance of the Gospel offer by faith on the part of man. This last point must now engage our attention.

The fact that the Gospel reveals God’s gracious judgment of justification and offers to all men, free and without charge, full forgiveness and perfect righteousness, does not mean that all men, or at least all that hear the Gospel, will also receive and have all these blessings. They are not forced on us, as the weather is, whether we like it or not. From Heb. 4:2 we learn that the Gospel does not profit some, not being mixed with faith in them that hear it. A present that was prepared at great cost and is sincerely and freely offered to a person will not benefit him if he refuses to accept it. Even so here. The great spiritual blessings which Christ prepared for all men by His holy life and His innocent suffering and death, and which are so freely offered to all in the Gospel, will not help those who reject them in unbelief, 2 Pet. 2:1; Luke 7:30.¹⁴ So objective or universal justification must not be construed to mean that *eo ipso* all men now also *enjoy* forgiveness, *are* personally justified, and will be saved.

God reveals and offers forgiveness, righteousness, and justification in the Gospel to the intent that men should hear it, trust in it, and accept it. For this reason Paul speaks not only of the reconciliation to God by Christ, not only of the Word of Reconciliation, but he adds, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, Be ye reconciled to God,” 2 Cor. 5:20. This does not mean that man must still do something to perfect the reconciliation inaugurated by Christ, nor does it mean that we must do something that will induce God to offer and bestow its blessings upon us, but it means that we should accept this reconciliation and all it implies; that, repenting of our sins, we trust in God who justifies the ungodly; that we personally enter into this new relationship with our God. And this can be done in no other way than by faith.

Again, in Rom. 1:16, 17 Paul speaks of the Gospel and tells us, “Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.” This is not the personal righteousness of God, for that is not of faith; but it is a righteousness that is intended for man. It is the righteousness Christ procured for us, 2 Cor. 5:21, a

¹² „Im Evangelium wird den Menschen nicht nur bekanntgegeben, dass, wenn sie glauben, sie gerecht und selig werden koennen, sondern dass fuer sie schon Gerechtigkeit vorhanden ist, dass Gott ueber sie schon ein guenstiges Urteil gefaellt hat, dass Gott in Christo die Menschheit mit Augen des Wohlgefallens ansieht, dass die Suender einen gnaedigen Gott haben.“ (Stoeckhardt, *Roemerbrief*, p. 46.)

¹³ “apprehending means”

¹⁴ 2 Pet. 2:1: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” Luke 7:30: but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.”

righteousness that avails before God, or as Luther puts it, “die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt.”¹⁵ It is revealed in the Gospel as a finished product; nothing need be or can be added thereto. It is a righteousness εἰς πίστιν, intended to be received through faith; and ἐκ πίστεως, it is ours as a result of faith. This plainly shows that the righteousness which Christ wrought for us, which God imputed to us, and which is revealed in the Gospel is to be taken by faith and possessed in faith. Therefore only he who believes the words of God’s promise has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God.

Objective, or universal, justification therefore does not mean that thereby all its blessings are willy-nilly bestowed on, and imparted to, the individual personally and that all men will now be saved. When Lincoln issued his proclamation of emancipation, all Negroes were thereby automatically, as it were, set free, irrespective of whether they wanted to be free or not; they simply were free. But when God issued His proclamation of emancipation, that gracious judgment of universal justification, there was added the stipulation ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν;¹⁶ it was intended to be received by faith and to be held by faith. “However, faith is now but a necessary annex of this righteousness that is revealed in the Gospel, only that one determines the relationship of faith to righteousness properly. ... Thus, the opinion of the apostle is this: that righteousness as a result of faith (ἐκ πίστεως)¹⁷ is our own. ... Δικαιοσύνη εἰς πίστιν,¹⁸ that is, such a righteousness, which is certain and extant for faith, reckoned on faith” (Stoeckhardt, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 46, 47).¹⁹ Whoever, therefore, does not believe that God has justified also him, does thereby not invalidate the judgment of God itself, Rom. 3:3;²⁰ 2 Tim. 2:12[-13],²¹ but he makes it of none effect as far as it concerns him, Luke 7:30.²² Not accepting and applying to himself that gracious judgment of God, he shall remain and die in his sins, John 8:24;²³ 12:26.²⁴ In order, then, that God’s promise of forgiveness and justification may profit the individual, it “must be mixed with faith in them that hear it,” Heb. 4:2. Faith is the means by which the individual enters into personal possession and enjoyment of what God reveals and offers in the Gospel.

In this entire matter the function of faith is purely receptive; it does not supply any deficiencies; it does not add an additional motive; it merely takes and holds what God promises and gives. Art. III of the Formula of Concord (*Trigl.*, p. 919) says: “Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously ... that poor sinful man is justified before God, that is, absolved and declared free and exempt from all sin and the sentence of well-deserved condemnation,” etc., ... “because of the sole merit, complete obedience, bitter suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us for righteousness. These treasures are offered us by the Holy Ghost in the promise of the holy Gospel; faith alone is the only means by which we lay hold upon, accept, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves.”

“Man is justified by faith.” – From what has been said above it must be clear what it means, and what it does not mean, to be justified by faith.

- a) It does not mean that “faith is so good a work and so fair a virtue” (*Trigl.*, p. 919) that for this reason God declares a believer just. Faith is indeed an act of man; for while it is the Holy Spirit that creates

¹⁵ This is in English: “The righteousness that avails before God,” which is nearly identical with the phrase earlier in this sentence: “a righteousness that avails before God.”

¹⁶ “from faith to faith”

¹⁷ “from faith”

¹⁸ “righteousness to faith” or “justification to faith”

¹⁹ „Allerdings ist nun aber der Glaube ein notwendiges Annex dieser Gerechtigkeit, die im Evangelium offenbart wird, nur dass man das Verhaeltnis des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit richtig bestimmt. ... So ist die Meinung des Apostels die, dass die Gerechtigkeit infolge des Glaubens (ἐκ πίστεως) uns zuteil, unser eigen wird. ... Δικαιοσύνη εἰς πίστιν, das heisst, eine solche Gerechtigkeit, welche fuer den Glauben bestimmt und vorhanden, auf den Glauben berechnet ist.“ (Stoeckhardt, *Roemerbrief*, pp. 46, 47.)

²⁰ “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”

²¹ “if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

²² “but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him [John the Baptist].”

²³ [Jesus said,] “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”

²⁴ [Jesus said,] “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

faith in man through the Gospel, it is man that does the believing. Yet faith, considered as an act, or work, of man, has no justifying power whatever. Faith justifies not *per se*, but because of the object it has and holds.

- b) It does not mean that faith is the organ through which means God declares a sinner just. The sentence by which God justifies the ungodly we have in the Gospel. By faith man merely trusts in this declaration, applies it to himself, as God wants him to do, and thus he personally becomes righteous.
- c) What, then, does it mean that man is justified by faith? We have learned that by grace, for Christ's sake, God once for all forgave all sins to all men, 2 Cor. 5:19, and adjudged them all righteous, or justified them, Rom. 5:18. This act of God is finished and need not be repeated and is not repeated. This gracious judgment of God is published in the Gospel, that all men might know of it and believe in it. This Gospel, offering to lost sinners such wonderful things, has the power to create in the hearts of penitent sinners that faith by which they trust and rely upon what God here declares, and thereby they apply and appropriate to themselves what God here offers. Thus it is that by faith the individual enters into possession and enjoyment of those blessings that were prepared for him and are here offered to him, and in this way he personally becomes righteous, becomes a justified man.

The text Rom. 3:28 has the words δικαιωθῆναι πίστει ἄνθρωπον.²⁵ How shall we translate the word δικαιωθῆναι? Liddell and Scott give the following definition for δικαιωθῆναι: “to make just, pronounce and treat as righteous, to justify.” The English version has “justified.” The dative πίστει is the *dativus instrumentalis* or *modi*,²⁶ and must be translated with “by means of.” The first meaning of δικαιωθῆναι, to make just, namely, by imputation, fits very well. In the passive it would mean to be made just or to become just. Our text then would read: “We conclude that man becomes just by means of faith, without the deeds of the Law.” Because by means of his faith he apprehends the merits of Christ, he now becomes a just man in the sight of God; or, because by means of faith he applies to himself the justifying sentence of God, as God wants him to do, he now becomes personally a justified man before God. Faith is neither the cause why God declares the sinner just, nor is it the means through which He pronounces him just, but being the *organon lepticon*,²⁷ it takes and lays hold of those things because of which he is accounted just. Luther brings out this fine point in his translation. He does not say, “that person is *pronounced* or *declared* righteous through faith”²⁸—this might possibly be misunderstood—but he says, “that the person *becomes* righteous through faith,”²⁹ certainly, by imputation.

In the Gospel God offers us sinners the riches of His grace, forgiveness of sins, the righteousness of Christ, justification unto life. All these things are now ready for me and for every other sinner. As they are offered to me in a promise, I can accept them in no other way than by faith. As I apprehend them by faith, they actually become my own, I have them, and thus I personally have become a just and righteous man in the sight of God. We speak of the justifying power of faith; yet in itself faith does not possess this power; the justifying power resides in the object to which our faith clings. It is not the act of taking, but the riches I take that make me rich. Therefore to be justified by faith means that by faith we trust in, and apply to ourselves, the gracious judgment of justification pronounced by God upon all men, and thus we personally become justified, and we remain under this gracious judgment as long as we continue in the faith.

The relation between objective and subjective justification.— We have spoken of objective, or universal, justification and of subjective, or personal, justification. These are not Biblical terms, but they are used by dogmatists to distinguish between the twofold use made in the Bible of the word “justify.” There is a group of texts in which the terms “justify” and “justification” are used of all men before they come to faith, as

²⁵ “a man to be justified by faith”

²⁶ “dative of means or mode”

²⁷ This is the Latin transliteration of the Greek, ὄργανον ληπτικόν, “receptive instrument,” “receptive organ,” “assimilative instrument,” or “instrument disposed to accept.”

²⁸ „dass der Mensch gerecht *gesprochen* oder *erklärt* werde durch den Glauben“

²⁹ „dass der Mensch gerecht *werde* durch den Glauben“

in Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:10, 18.³⁰ And there is another group of texts where the word “justify” is used of those who come to faith, Rom. 3:26, 28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; Acts 13:39;³¹ and others. Likewise we find that in Rom. 5:19 the obedience, or righteousness, of Christ is imputed to many (all), and in Rom. 4:11 we learn that it is imputed to the believers. And in 2 Cor. 5:19 we are told that the trespasses were not imputed, hence forgiven, to the world, and in Matt. 9:2³² we find that Christ forgives sins to an individual, and in Mark 11:26³³ He tells us that God will not forgive sins to those who do not forgive their neighbor. One group of texts speaks of a universal justification, forgiveness, and imputation of Christ’s righteousness; the other group speaks of an individual, personal justification, forgiveness, and imputation of righteousness. How shall we understand this? If the only justifying and forgiving act of God takes place the moment a person comes to faith, then the texts which speak of a universal justification are meaningless, and if personal justification is a repetition of objective justification, then the latter was superfluous and ineffective. But if the only forgiving and justifying act took place in the court of God before any man believed, and if this act covers all men, the world, what does it then mean that God forgives sins to the believer, imputes to him righteousness and justifies him which believeth in Christ, Rom. 3:26? In short, what is the relation between universal and personal justification?

The all-embracing justifying act of God, by which He forgave all sins to all men, accounted them righteous, and justified them *intuitu Christi*,³⁴ took place, humanly speaking, the moment He accepted the redemptive work of His Son for the reconciliation of the world, 2 Cor. 5:19; Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:10, 18. It was then that in the court of heaven He freely by grace for Christ’s sake absolved all sinners and declared them just. And this act of God need not be repeated and is not repeated, even as the redemption by Christ, on which it is based, is never repeated.

What happens in the case of the believer, who trusts in, and apprehends, this gracious judgment of God, is that as he applies this justification to himself, God also applies it to him and confirms it upon him. With the believer the objective justification becomes effective, God declares him a recipient of the forgiveness offered to all.

By which of these, universal or personal justification, are the benefits of justification bestowed on man?— It has been said if God in Christ has forgiven all sins and declared all men just, what further need is there of faith? Does universal justification not give, bestow, and impart to all men forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life? From what has been said above it is clear that our answer is definitely, No. Objective justification has taken place in the mind and heart of God; in His own court He has adjudged all men just and righteous, Rom. 5:18, 19.³⁵ This fact God revealed to us in the Gospel for the purpose that we should accept it in faith, Rom. 1:17.³⁶ He who fails or refuses to do this, who does not avail himself of what God has

³⁰ Rom. 3:24: “and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”; Rom. 4:25: “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”; Rom. 5:10: “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”; Rom. 5:18: “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.”

³¹ Rom. 3:26: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”; Rom. 3:28: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”; Rom. 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”; Gal. 2:16: “yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified”; Acts 13:[38-]39: “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

³² Matt. 9:2: “And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.’ ”

³³ Mark 11:26: “But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” This verse is not found in the earliest manuscripts. It is quoted here from the King James Version. It is found in the earliest manuscripts of Matt. 6:15: “but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

³⁴ “in view of Christ”

³⁵ Rom. 5:18, 19: “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”

³⁶ Rom. 1:17: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ ”

done for him and what God offers to him, will certainly not be benefited, Heb. 4:2. To have and hold and enjoy them, it is necessary that the individual accept them in faith.

It is by what we call personal justification that all the blessings settled upon us in objective justification are applied, conferred, bestowed, and imparted to us. To have and possess a gift that is prepared and intended for me, I must take it. And since these blessings are offered to us in an unconditional promise, there is positively no other means by which we can take them than faith. Thus it is by faith, and by faith alone, that man obtains the forgiveness of his sins, puts on the garment of Christ's righteousness, and becomes personally justified before God. And it will never happen that God will tell a believer that he appropriated something to himself that was not intended for him. By faith man possesses himself of what God wants him to have. It is in this way that faith is reckoned for righteousness, Rom. 4:5; in this way God is the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus, Rom. 3:26; in this way He would justify the heathen, Gal. 3:8; in this way righteousness is imputed to the believers, Rom. 4:11, and forgiveness of sins is imparted to them, Matt. 9:2. Hence objective justification without subjective justification profits no man; yet subjective justification without objective justification is impossible.

The certainty of forgiveness of sins and of justification by faith.— The personal certainty that by faith we have the forgiveness of our sins and are justified before God is based on the objective fact that in Christ God has forgiven all sins and justified the ungodly. No one can personally be sure that by faith he has obtained forgiveness and is accounted righteous, as long as the least doubt attaches to this fact. Our sins must have been forgiven before we can be sure that they are forgiven; God must have declared us just before we can by faith be sure of this fact. The fact, as revealed in the Gospel, that God forgave all sins and declared all the ungodly just is the foundation on which the certainty of faith rests.

In this connection we would call attention to the Fifth Petition, "Forgive us our trespasses." Does this mean that our sins were unforgiven before, and are only now forgiven by God in answer to our prayer? From 2 Cor. 5:19 we learn that when God in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself, He did not impute their trespasses unto them; that means that then already God forgave the sins to all men. What, then, can this petition mean? Does it mean that God should once more forgive our sins? The very fact that God commands us so to pray makes this petition a promise and assurance of forgiveness on His part. For He certainly would not tell us to pray for forgiveness if this forgiveness were not yet ready for us. He who sincerely prays this petition thereby shows that he realizes his need of forgiveness, and is certain that he shall get it.

But what does it mean when Christ says, "When ye stand praying, forgive if ye have ought against any, that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses," Mark 11:25, 26. Does this mean that the great act by which God forgives sins to men has not yet taken place, but will take place only when and if we forgive our neighbor? that the forgiving act of God would depend upon the forgiving act of man? Such interpretation would be contrary to what God tells us 2 Cor. 5:19 and Rom. 5:18, 19. If God did not impute sins to the world, then He forgave sins to all men, including the person that will not forgive his neighbor. What Christ means to say is that he who is unforgiving in his heart cannot and shall not *have* the forgiveness, which is indeed ready also for him. For he who does not forgive his brother has no faith, and it is by faith alone that we can take and hold the forgiveness God offers to us in the Gospel. Whatever kills faith in the heart deprives us of all we held by faith. We have forgiveness and justification as long as we continue in the faith; faith lost, forgiveness, righteousness, and salvation is lost. This text therefore does not contradict 2 Cor. 5:19, for as little as the impenitence of man can nullify the redemption by Christ, can it nullify the sentence of God's justification and forgiveness. What it does do is this, that as long as a person remains impenitent, it makes the gracious will and sentence of God noneffective and inoperative as far as it concerns this particular person.

Forgiveness of sins is the result and product of the forgiving act of God. The act of forgiving took place when God accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world; this act is never repeated. But the forgiveness of sins is continually being offered to us in the Gospel to be accepted by faith. The Gospel does not promise forgiveness to us as a future blessing we may hope for, as we hope for eternal life, but it is offered as an accomplished fact. The believer does not say, I hope that God will forgive my sins to me; but, trusting in the Word of God, he says, I know that God has forgiven me all my sins and "that He richly and daily forgives

all sins to me and all believers.” And in this he is absolutely right. Because God has forgiven and justified me, therefore I am by faith sure that I am, and am being, forgiven and justified. Thus it is that objective justification by grace in Christ makes subjective justification by faith sure and certain to me.

We like to think of objective justification as the bank of God, in which is deposited for all men an inexhaustible treasure of grace and forgiveness. This treasure was prepared and earned by Christ and is sufficient for all the needs of all men. God does not forgive my sins only when I come to this bank, but the treasure is there, it is ready and waiting for me. This bank of God is open at all hours, day and night, and as often as I penitently turn to God in faith to draw on this treasure for my daily needs, He will not refuse me, John 6:37;³⁷ He will never tell me, No more funds for you, you are overdrawing your account. For He tells me, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool,” Is. 1:18. This bank never fails; it is always solvent, no matter how many sinners come and how large the amounts they draw; for “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,” Rom. 5:20, and with the Lord there is “plenteous redemption,” Ps. 130:7. If a person, therefore, does not get what is deposited for him, it is entirely his own fault; he has no faith whereby he can draw on this heavenly treasure. Our chief concern therefore is not what God will do with our sins, for that has been settled long ago, Christ atoned for them and God forgave them; but our concern must be, How shall we *obtain and possess ourselves of this forgiveness*, how may we personally become righteous? And there is but one answer: “Believe the Gospel,” Mark 1:15; “Believe in Jesus Christ,” Acts 16:31; “Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves,” 2 Cor. 13:5.

The faith by which the individual accepts the forgiveness of his sins and applies to himself the justifying sentence of God is created in the heart by God Himself through the Gospel, John 17:20. Yet a discussion of this point would lead us into the doctrine of conversion, which lies beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, we are to teach this Gospel for the purpose that men might thereby come to faith, and no one can do this effectively if he does not understand the principal doctrine of the Gospel, the doctrine of justification. For this doctrine is the very heart of the Gospel. Without it the Bible could not make us wise unto salvation; without it the life and death of Christ would have no meaning, and our faith would be vain; without it our sanctification of life would lack the proper motivation, and no penitent sinner could have the sure hope of life eternal. Let us therefore guard this doctrine as the apple of our eye, and may God preserve it in our midst pure and undefiled.

River Forest, Ill.

E.W.A. KOEHLER

³⁷ John 6:37: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”